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Assessing a Poetics of the Lyric in the Works of Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler

When it comes to her approach to the lyric, Claudia Rankine makes things look easy: her love of poetry in general, and the lyric genre in particular, originates from both her expressed desire and the ongoing poetic task of "pull[ing] the lyric back into its realities" (Chiasson n. pag.). By voicing her personal commitment to lyric poetry, not only does Rankine openly declare both a formal and a professional intention that impacts her engagement with poetry writing, but she also announces her contribution to an ongoing project in poetics[1] organized around intense reflections regarding the formal developments that the Western lyric has undergone in time, and from which Jonathan Culler's far-reaching work *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) is often singled out. Apart from recognizing certain continuities within the genre across time, Culler's study progressively reveals a number of similarities between canonical lyrics from very different periods which allow him to identify specific lyrical tenets capable of addressing the lyric's "vital generic tradition" (*Theory of the Lyric* 33), of shaping that tradition, and of resisting the temptation to read lyric poetry with a view to either linking it to fiction or to the intense expression of subjective experience.[2]

By staging a dialogue between Rankine and Culler, namely between a poet and a critic, this article will discuss extracts from Rankine's first and penultimate collections to show how her approach to lyric poetry has been incremental, guiding her writing towards a poetic practice that has grown to be both intrinsically poetic and socially charged. While the publication of *Nothing in Nature Is Private* (1994)[3] signaled Rankine's poetic debut in the public sphere, it nonetheless moved into areas usually assigned to fiction: e.g., the location within US society of a Jamaican American woman, whose life experiences and encounters are communicated via plain dialogues among the poems' speakers. Since Rankine's poetics has only gradually grown into a lyric understanding of poetry, an outspoken interest in the genre does not appear until *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and *Citizen* (2014), both bearing the subtitle "An American Lyric." Rankine's choice of qualifying these collections as "lyric" directly links her work to the large tradition of lyric poetry her poems derive from and speak back to; yet, her move is an even bolder one, as she tellingly defines her lyrics "American", thus geographically, historically, and socially tracing them back to "their own realities" in order to address the instances of systematic racism occurring within a highly racialized society.[4] By staunchly grounding her lyrics in current American society, Rankine is also questioning the idea that lyric poetry should tend towards abstraction, i.e. its traditional "stripping away from all details associated with a socially-specific self" (Vendler 3).

Although my attempt to build a connection between Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler might appear unusual – given the fact that Rankine is ardently engaged in the workings of racial imaginaries and in blending aesthetic experimentation with social awareness, while Culler is particularly interested in the effects that the lyric's structure brings about – such effort seems to me to be justified by the way both authors maintain an open and inclusive critical perspective towards any attempt at defining the lyric. Whereas Culler favors the incorporation of issues and constants from different periods and languages in *any* account of the lyric genre (*Theory of the Lyric* 38), Rankine's poems have worked both within and against the very tradition of lyric poetry. Moreover, the inductive influence that a poet's work can have on a critic's descriptions of generic features is profoundly significant to developing a body of criticism that is keenly aware of the creative pathways of lyric poetry and its relation to the everyday. This is precisely why I chose to propose a dialogue between these two different angles of vision, a choice that finds its bearings in the necessity to foreground mutuality and to speak of tradition in more contemporary and revisionist terms: if Culler's delineation of salient features that are distinctive of the lyric helps readers approach difficult formal questions, it also speaks to the contemporary desire to venture beyond a conceptualization of lyric poetry determined by form, as present-day practitioners of the genre display. Notably, although Rankine's *Citizen* works within the lyric's main tenets, her readers have questioned whether this is the best approach to experiencing and describing lyric poems. As a matter of fact, I believe Rankine picks up the conversation where Culler's survey left it, placing the interchange of "Lyric and Society" (*Theory of the Lyric* 296) and the relation between imagination and ideology at the heart of lyric studies today.

Over a twenty-year timespan, Rankine's poems have progressively drawn from aesthetic sources capable of challenging readers' built-in assumptions, with a view to ultimately renewing their contact with the world, as well as guiding them towards "questing what might otherwise be" (Rich 234). Similarly, Culler's argument in *Theory of the Lyric* is not limited to a mainly aesthetic account of the lyric. His propensity to formulate a poetics does not express "an attempt to make explicit the moves of the interpretative process, to systemize the operations of literary criticism," but rather reveals a current need to "explore the most unsettling and intriguing aspects of lyric language and the different sorts of seductive effects that lyric may achieve" (viii). While lyrics must not be deprived of salient features that are especially lyrical, literary analysis should still be devoted to developing reading strategies that work *against* readers' expectations. In this sense, Rankine's conception of the lyric aligns with Culler's to the extent that they both reconcile one major theme of poetry with the act of poetic imagination. Lyric's potential role of helping readers structure a new understating of the world achieves social effectiveness once lyric's potential for critique is received and welcomed by readers, or once "the predictability of the subject's response to experience" is undermined, and the ideology informing that response is exposed (338). In "On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary," Rankine and Beth Loffreda reflect on the role readers' and writers' imagination plays when it enters into dialogue with a literary text, whether that imagination is put to use for the creation of a poem or a novel, or whether it is activated by the process of reading. As Culler suggests, when one's imagination is struck by its encounter with a text's unsettling features and intriguing language, the text is also performing a social role in the sense that it foregrounds ideology and unseats any cut and dried position the reader might be inclined to assume. In this sense, Rankine and Loffreda's essay presents a solid argument in favor of the imagination's dependence on the tangible reality that shapes one's frame of mind. They also argue for literature's role in providing a critique of both society and its tendency to maintain the status quo. While Rankine and Loffreda direct their critical attention to writers who wish to imagine the life of an "other" whose race is different from their own, they also query misleading assumptions usually ascribed to the imagination by those who define the latter as a dimension free of race. Accordingly, their advice to artists is to engage in a self-searching act which would gradually enable them to determine to what extent an imaginative frame thus defined can actually mediate or limit one's view of the world. They also sustain that by regularly attending to it, writers can support the imagination's infinite capacity for readjustment.

Nonetheless, both Rankine and Culler seem to be telling us that in order to become aware of social phenomena we *do* need the lyric; in other words, we need to listen to the text, "hear a different note" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 291), and "fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor" (Rankine, *Citizen* I). In light of the above, Rankine's call to bring the lyric back into its realities raises the following question: which realm did the lyric poem flee to and now works in, if one needs to "pull it back" into its realities? In addition, by wishing to return the lyric to *its* realities, one is also making the claim that there is such a thing as a lyrical dimension, proper to this literary genre alone. This, in turn, begs the question as to what distinguishes this dimension from that of everyday life and provokes us into considering why the lyric is necessary. The series of questions solicited by Rankine's statement fully complicates her initial reflection on the lyric's comeback for the simple reason that they reflect the middle-ground position the lyric occupies: anchored in the "here" and "now" of poetic enunciation as much as it is rooted in the "here" and "now" of our contemporary historical moment. Working both within and against Culler's lyric parameters, *Citizen* represents Rankine's first critical attempt at expanding existing theories of the lyric.

When compared to *Citizen*, *Nothing in Nature Is Private* seems to conform to one of lyric's most-referred to models by coupling it "to the fictional representation of a speaker character whose novelistic situation the reader is asked to reconstruct," simply by asking what would lead someone to speak thus and to feel thus (Culler, "Why Lyric" 201). Rankine considers her first poems – written in 1993 as an M.A. student in Fine Arts – rather neat in form and stereotyped in their depiction of her characters' early life experiences, which are described by the poet as performances of blackness and immigration (Schultz 118). In "Before *Citizen*: Lyric Subjectivity and the Language of Experience in Claudia Rankine's *Nothing in Nature Is Private,*" Kathy Lou Schultz highlights how the aesthetic of her earlier poems did not reflect the sense of freedom – or of "messiness," for Rankine a synonym for formal liberation – that her subsequent poetry collections exemplify by means of an overall experimental aesthetic frame. The poet herself recognizes how upon writing the poems that would later become *Nothing in Nature Is Private*, she underwent the experience of working to a deadline, "trying to hit poems over the net back to a room full of people," and facing up to the "constant struggle between satisfying the expectations of the program and what your unconscious wants to investigate" (qtd. in Schultz 118). Indeed, if one compares the stanzaic arrangement of Rankine's juvenilia with the formally experimental nature of her 2014 publication *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the above-mentioned messiness is perceptible from page one. *Citizen's* hybrid aesthetics makes one question the subtitle the collection bears. However, although in her review of the book Kate Kellaway believes that "the question becomes insignificant as one reads on" (n. pag.), her further remarks on the collection's contents do not shy away from *Citizen*'s lyrical character: "her achievement," she declares, "is to have created a bold work that occupies its *own* space powerfully" (n. pag; italics mine). By contrast, both Rankine's and the readership's scant consideration of her first volume seems to originate from the poems' lack of formal rebellion against established notions of poetry. Apart from encouraging a definition of lyric as *mimesis*, these early poems can also be read and analyzed as the expression of the subjective experience of the poet since they draw on events from Rankine's own life: probably at the age of seven, Rankine left Kingston Jamaica and traveled to the US.

"New Windows" is a three-page-long poem prefaced by a descriptive epigraph that sets the tone for the poem's ensuing "digression." Fulfilling its rhetorical role, the epigraph anticipates the content one will read in the text, functioning as a temporal reference point for the reader's *quasi* narrative reconstruction of the speaker's life story. It is 1968, and we learn from the poem that the speaker is a six-year-old child flying to the US, when a flight attendant approaches the child's seat and hands her a white eyelet sweater, with the words: "*This is America/ [...] cold, not like the West Indies. / One needs a jacket of some kind here*" (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature..." 25). Following the epigraph, a three-word sentence – "I trailed off" – moved to the right-hand side of the page seems to announce an almost theater-like change of scene: lights dimming, only to grow brighter and focused on a different scenario. Temporally speaking, the poem flashes forward to two adults sitting next to each other in first class on an ordinary Thursday. While one of the passengers is definitely a white southern businessman, the person sitting next to him is neither described nor defined, even though the reader's imagination is likely to picture a black woman in her forties. The choice of words Rankine resorts to as the poem's speaker accounts for the circumstance is sufficient to allow us to draw conclusions about the races of the interlocutors. The speaker describes the man as eager to start a conversation with her, "or more/ precisely, he wished to understand how / he came to be sitting next to me in first / class on that otherwise ordinary Thursday" (25). Defining that Thursday as "otherwise ordinary" testifies to the fact that, because of the white passenger's "need to place" (26), the scene of a black woman sitting in first class is looked upon as an unlikely daily occurrence.

This being said, Rankine provides her readers with just enough material to visualize the rest of the poem. Although poems' "tangling with ideology" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 337) usually informs their success with the readers – whether by meeting or by working against the latter's expectations – lyric poetry is typically known for negating, opposing, or "infiltrat[ing] the ideology [it] may have sought to engage" (337). Even so, Rankine's "New Windows," rather than "infiltrating ideology" seems to predict readers' responses to the living arrangements the poem gives shape to. The poem exposes such arrangements by representing an event that might likely happen in one's daily life. In this sense, while the scenario depicted in the poem readily catches the readers' imagination, it nonetheless takes up imaginative space that could have been dedicated instead to indeterminacy of meaning, or to shaking built-in assumptions. In other words, by reading this poem according to the two models that Culler works towards opposing, one can notice how its language does not yield the sort of seduction that poetic language and form are capable of generating. On the contrary, one is led to participate in a narrative-like reading of the poem, as the temporal details presented in the opening epigraph again suggest – "It was late November, 1968" (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature…" 25).

Despite Rankine's own claims against the integrity and potential of this first collection, and despite the fact that the poems themselves seem to reinforce Rankine's thematic concerns, *Nothing in Nature Is Private* is really representative of how the task of restoring the lyric back to its reality has actually been incrementally engaged in her work. Whether stereotypical or not in their depictions, Rankine's first poems still show signs of an interest in the formal fabric of the lyric. For example, the presence of ellipsis separating the poem's lines performs the function of a sensuous factor that negotiates both the communication between the two speakers (the woman and the businessman), and the relation between text and reader. Thus, the ellipsis takes what happens in the poem outside of the poetic zone itself. Thanks to this small formal device, the poem also raises questions about the connection between form and content (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 31). Accordingly, because of the visual break the ellipsis generates, the poem simultaneously achieves a change of content, a re-framing of scene, and a re-contextualization of both the section that is being read and of previous stanzas, now read in the light of the content provided by new sections. The inclusion of ellipsis within the poem also allows for a counterpoint of voices to enter into dialogue with each other and for multiple temporal planes to coexist. Moreover, the repetition of ellipsis in various moments of the poem foregrounds the poem's "ring structure," or rather "the return at the end to the request of the beginning" (16). In the third section of the poem, a man in a gray suit rings the doorbell of the speaker's home. After greeting him with a smile, the man "looks past me / in search of – I'll use his words – / *I need to speak to your employer, / to someone who lives here*" (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature…" 26). The poem continues:

> After he left – he had come
> about new windows – I remembered
> the southern businessman. His litany
> of questions. His need to place.

> The persistence with which he asked,
> *You aren't a lawyer, are you?*
> His curiosity had made me laugh,
> So I told him everything,
> described everything, including
> the first flight I ever flew in. (25-26)

Closing the poem's last section with two lines that hint back to the epigraph, not only is Rankine's poem building a circular structure, but is also thematically engaging with its own title.

The relatedness encouraged by the formal structure of the poem and enacted through a repeated use of ellipsis and temporal juxtapositions, simultaneously mirrors the connectedness the image of the window invokes. Much like the bridging role Rankine assigns to ellipsis, the window, too, occupies a middle space between two positions and environments. The title of the poem is therefore poignant, as it thematizes the genre's persistent thrust towards renewal. Having said that, one can formulate the following generative questions: could the new windows the man had come for refer to the need to reset one's imagination to new interpretative pathways ultimately capable of undermining one's already established view of the world? Or do windows both metonymically and metaphorically stand for the imaginative frame one preemptively projects upon the world? Although between the second and third section of the poem one learns that the reason behind the man's visit are windows, and *new* ones (26), the poem's voiced desire to think about new ways of living, structuring, and channeling one's connection to reality, does not seem to actually offer any chance to "break open locked chambers of possibility" or "restore numbed zones of feeling" (Rich xvi). It seems, instead, to show how relationships function when they are informed by structures of power. Hence, rather than building an actual relation between the poem and its readers, the connective spaces "New Windows" generates work towards the creation of a storyline that the readers are required to reconstruct. Therefore, the poem's narrative builds upon both the content and the formal arrangement of its sections, as the progression of stanzas is faithful to the poem's structural and thematic coherence. Although the poem's specific formal devices can be read as sensuous features capable of attracting attention, they nonetheless remain functional to the working of the text itself, rather than being in the service of increasing the readers' awareness of or feeling of responsibility for the unjust reality they might unwittingly contribute to perpetuating. Put more simply, readers are not asked to actively participate in the realm of the poem, since the poem's voices, instead of entailing a performance by readers themselves, have already been assigned to specific characters and it is in this guise that they are presented to the audience. Because the poem does not call for the readers' participation in the meaning-making process, their imagination remains inactive: instead of unfixing meaning and unsettling positions of power, Rankine's "New Windows" seems instead to expose fixed relations of power governed by dichotomic principles.

Poetry and imagination share common ground if one considers poetics as the exploration of the formal means readers are intrigued and unsettled by in their encounter with the poetic text, and imagination as "the great inbuilt instrument of othering"[5] capable of connecting the poem's language to desire and the everyday. The desire to change the everyday is rooted in an idea of poetry as the celebration of imaginative possibilities through readers and language or, more specifically, through the readers' performance of the poem's language. With relation to this, Culler has identified four constant parameters[6] that distance the lyric from the novel or from narrative poems. These parameters are organized according to four topics which respectively emphasize: lyric's systematic structure of enunciation and use of indirect address; its ritualistic aspect, which can be described as the possibility of repeating lyric language in different time spans; lyric's achieved status as an "event," vis-à-vis its definition as the *representation* of an event; its optative quality, and more specifically its capacity to articulate desires in the world. In "New Windows," however, the sections of the poem as well as the characters' dialogue provide snapshots of the speakers' lives, steeping the poem in realism rather than suffusing it with surprise, and imbuing it with an anecdotal rather than a lyrical quality. Instead of reporting a dialogue between fictional speakers, lyric address should "lift us out of an anecdotal space into a distinctly poetic one" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 23) that remains indexical rather than exhaustive (Vendler 6). Again, in dealing with the conundrums of representation and perspective, the poem smoothly adheres to a narrative reading lens: "New Windows" introduces speakers or personas rather than presenting events that need to be voiced by the reader.

"Fragment of a Border" ventures into a similar territory: the poem is presented as a scene from a wider plot wherein a contextually-situated speaker voices their concerns and stands their ground:

> See me standing here
> Waiting for the lights to change?
> Recognize me. I was born black
> With bloodshot eyes […]
> In your face recognize,
>
> my Jamaican face,
> an American face. (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature…" 21)

The location of the self and the claim for recognition and intimation of multiple identities are the overarching themes addressed in this first collection of poems. Despite the employment of literary devices usually reserved for fiction, Rankine's early works are representative of the sound balance between accuracy and aesthetics that the contemporary lyric seeks to accomplish when "it decides to face outward rather than inward" (Vendler 6). Rankine's task of "pulling the lyric back into its realities" can be read as a poetic endeavor aimed at remarking how the social and the cultural keep intruding into the space of the lyric, hence developing an aesthetics that demands the attention of critique.

In the introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*, a collective volume co-edited by Rankine and Juliana Sphar, lyric's problematic *locus* of investigation takes central stage. Far from being a "simplistic genre" (1), the anthology emphasizes lyric's inevitable link to innovation and experimentation, as well as its potential for creating "connective spaces" (11). Indeed, the contemporary seems to be paying keen attention to the ways the social and the political alter or encroach on the defining aspects of the lyric. Even so, I believe that the core of the debate over the novelties that the lyric genre must take on does not lie in the influence of extratextual affairs on the lyrical language: such an interchange is a given. Rather, it is the *utter visibility* of this relation that critics are calling into question, given the fact that lyric is the genre of indirection. Rankine's project in poetics is keenly aware of the bond between forms and conventions insofar as such bond draws on their respective relation to material existence. In this sense, Culler's four parameters are both explanatory and exploratory of lyric's inescapable connection with the everyday, and of Rankine's opening statement in support of her own poetic project. Although Culler remains uncertain of lyric's capacity to actually embolden social change or to determine when such a change can happen in time, he nonetheless believes that lyric's formal solidity is capable of conveying a feeling and guiding readers into traveling alterative pathways of understating that may ultimately undermine or expose the existing concepts that structure our world. Much of lyric's social efficacy and ability to create a formal dynamic within the text depends on the extent to which lyric language can "embed itself in the mind of readers, to invade and occupy it, to be taken in, introjected, or housed as instances of alterity that can be repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 305).

Rankine's *Citizen* offers a powerful example of how contemporary poetry can draw on the lyric genre and achieve lyrical effects by means of a very innovative aesthetic frame: comprised as it is of accumulated instances of microaggressions, Rankine's *Citizen* relies on depictions of lyric temporality and of lyric's mode of address to underscore the ever-present pervasiveness of acts of racism in the US. She also brings into play these two lyric features to raise questions and concerns about the status of the lyric "event." In his article "Citizen: A Lyric Event," Grant Farred elaborates at length on Rankine's fidelity as well as resistance to the lyric genre as Culler defines it. By refusing to align lyric discourse with fiction, Culler connects what is happening within the space of the lyric poem with the act of enunciation itself, comprised of sensuous features such as rhyme schemes (where there is one), sound patterns, and triangulated address (or indirection), all striving to make something happen in the "now" of poetic discourse (Farred 95). Indeed, Culler maintains that the main focus of lyric reading should be directed to experiencing the poem itself as an *event,* rather than as the expression of, or the assertions made by, a speaker. While foregrounding the lyric's status as an "event," Culler is also introducing its *ritualistic* features; as the reader voices the poem, the latter is constituted as an event that can be conceivably re-enacted for as many times as the lyric is actually uttered by readers. This allows lyric poems to build a constantly renewed connection to the world they access by "offering a performative unity into which readers and auditors may enter at will" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 123). Despite the fact that Culler conceives of readers' free access into the lyric space and into the lyric event as a crucial generic possibility enacted by lyrics' textual features, he nonetheless laments how criticism neglects such a significant and powerful device. Through their act of voicing, each time they utter the poem, readers ritualistically live in the space of lyrics, while at the same time distancing lyric reading from a fictional and novelizing track. The indeterminacy conveyed by the second person pronoun together with a speech act happening in the present tense contribute to developing lyric's enunciative function as much as its endurance in time and space. Lyric does not so much represent a past event, as it evokes this same event in the lyric present by means of readers. Despite lyric's self-uttered statement and intrinsic potential of living in the "here and now" of past, present, and future spatial realms, Culler's parameters are nonetheless subject to methodological limits if one considers the emergence of various and divergent critical approaches to poetry analysis based on how the poem marries poetics with public affairs. In the first section of *Citizen*, one poem voices the following:

> A friend argues that Americans battle between the "historical
> self," and the "self self." By this she means you mostly interact
> as friends with mutual interests and, for the most part,
> compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical
> selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self
> and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American
> positioning. Then you are standing face to face in seconds that
> wipe the effable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say?
> (Rankine, *Citizen* 14)

The interplay between the abstraction lyric poems are asked to achieve and the "punctuation" of those abstractions by means of context is visible from the start. There are moments – this extract communicates – in which one's unquestioned and equal right to citizenship intrudes on a one-on-one conversation with a close friend. The commonly-shared value of friendship is disrupted by the full force of their "American positioning." At this point, what the lyric can do, and what I contend Rankine's extract achieves, is to recreate the tension that caused the encounter to become uncomfortable in the first place, and recover a poetic device capable of calling the reader to take on their part in the poem: the second person pronoun. The lyrical "you," Culler contends, "is at bottom characterized by the foregrounding of that indeterminate potential that makes *you* at once a specific other, the most general other, and *one*" ("The Language of Lyric" 165). While Rankine qualifies her pronouns first as "historical selves," and then as either black or white, thus resisting any lyrical attempt at generalization, the ultimate effect of the lyric is withheld and left up to the reader. In a similar fashion, Farred's article argues that *Citizen* "fits the lyric as a language for disrupting the now" (110), instead of keeping it in a state of fathomless arrest. Accordingly, he illustrates how Rankine's "you" works towards punctuating and halting the ordinary flow of events, giving voice to racist occurrences that would otherwise remain concealed or dismissed. As Rankine turns to the lyrical "you" to expose acts of microaggressions inflicted on African American citizens, she is both pulling the lyric back into its own realities and linking lyric language to the American experience. In *Citizen*, the lyric's juxtaposition of "soul and self" (Vendler 7-9) – namely, lyric's own voice lifted from the specificities of context and lyric's grounding in real-life occurrences – only partly gives way to the rules of abstraction, immortality, and freedom. While one can argue that the references included in her extract are indexical, the fact remains that the smooth conversational tone and the foregrounding of the "self" clearly point to a decided critique of and a resistance to social conventions and ideology. Hence, by connecting her work to a very long generic tradition, and by tinging this tradition with everyday occurrences, Rankine's *Citizen* reframes the lyric as,

> that which happens in the world, and as that which happens (in part) because of what is happening in the world [...] As such, the happening – that happening, we might say – that is the lyric as poetic event disarticulates the world by investing it [...] with a new social imaginary. In this regard, as we well know, there can be no alternative social imaginary without the event. (Farred 97)

Paraphrasing Farred's insights, Rankine's lyric achieves the status of event to the extent that the subtle acts of racism she uncovers in language are thought to alter the existence of those whom her lyrics address. This being said, the project in poetics Rankine undertakes turns out to be an imaginative project as well, rooted as it is in imaginative possibilities and desires.

Citizen's capacity to speak to the Western poetic tradition by formally reframing conventional parameters is reflected in the poet's choice to subtitle her volume "An American Lyric." In Christopher Lydon's *Open Source* interview with Claudia Rankine and her fellow poets, poet and professor Jessica Bozek concentrates on the immediate encounter one has with the book upon reading its lyrical premise: glancing at the cover of the collection, the title as a whole, together with the image of a suspended black hoodie held up against a blank white background anticipates the material to be found in the work, while also questioning the notion of how lyric poetry can be described (15:20). In accordance with Farred's critical reading of the book, the *Open Source*'s discussion of *Citizen* centers round Rankine's distinctive use of the lyrical "you." As the poets participating in the interview describe the second person pronoun as both a problematic and intriguing rhetorical resource in tune with the poetic thrust towards experimentation, it still feels pivotal to underline that Rankine's use of such an innovative means is rooted in lyric's traditional use of indirection, or indirect address. It also speaks to the connection between poetry, imagination, and society. As much as contemporary times have given rise to different types of poetry that seek to speak for and back to society, in fact, the link between art and society is by no means a recent formulation. In his 1833 essay "What Is Poetry?," John Stuart Mill expressed his disappointment with the lack of what he called "the ideal lyric" poet, one that could be representative of both originality and acquired culture, a personality not yet seen in his time. In order to distinguish between different modes of discourse, Mill also wrote that while "eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard" (n. pag.), a distinction later retrieved by Northrop Frye as he recognizes the foundation of lyrical dynamics in the moment poets turn their back on their listeners and pretend to be talking to themselves or to someone else (*Anatomy of Criticism* 248-9). However, by turning their back on their listeners/readers, poets can still offer their language to them with *indirection*, that is, through a lyric structure of triangulated address whereby readers are addressed through the act of address to an imagined addressee.

Although in the English language the second-person pronoun lends itself to such indeterminacy, it is also suggestive of intimacy; the pronoun's act of addressability is potentially both plural and singular, therefore capable of achieving an indirect form of address, while also functioning as a "pure place holder" (Culler, "The Language of Lyric" 165). By engaging with the long and always evolving tradition of lyric genre, Rankine's work proves to be remarkably welcoming towards the potentialities of lyric conventions while, at the same time, demonstrating her ability to be responsive to what her own times are asking for. She specifically engrosses readers in a very instructional reading of her own poems, by showing what changes occur in the space of the poem, the readers themselves, and lyric genre in general when the poetic materials are drawn from everyday occurrences. In her interview with Rankine, Lauren Berlant remarks on *Citizen*'s creation of spectatorship: it is not conjured, she comments, "from a protected space that gets projected into a public, but from an intimate distance that is both singular and collective, overwhelming and alienating, crowded and lonely" (n. pag.). By ignoring her listeners or readers, Rankine has chosen to resort to a mode of address capable of conveying indeterminacy as well as immediacy and directionality. Whether her "you" is addressing one reader in particular or an indefinite group, it nonetheless expands towards individually addressing readers as a collective, or as citizens of the book. As one cannot escape the poet's invitation to participate in the aftermath of micro-aggressions that the book recounts, *Citizen* takes her first collection's descriptions of race and immigration to another level of understanding: the second-person pronoun no longer fits its traditional definition as a lyrical feature employed to indirectly address readers. Rather, Rankine resorts to this pronoun as a way to directly call upon readers' efforts to consider and perhaps accept her invitation to enter the poem's dimension and inhabit a space that may feel uncomfortable. As she is aware of the possibility that readers might also withdraw from such a solicitation, she maintains that the distance they place between themselves and the text remains indicative of their engagement with the collection ("Citizen Speak" 33:32). Hence, their attention is always asked for.

Rankine's career-long approach to the lyric genre has been impressively both experimental *and* traditional. By "pulling the lyric back into its reality," she has increasingly created a dialogue with lyric's enduring tradition and long-standing practice, while also bending lyrics' salient features in order to suit her own poetic needs. She has responded to established uses and functionalities of lyrics' indirect address to reveal the importance of the readers' participation in works of art, in spite of the challenges they are invited to face. Rankine works within the lyric genre only to expand its boundaries, question the dangers certain lyrical features can have on one's imagination, and reveal the inconsistencies of those features with regard to what is happening in the tangible world. Indeed, one foundational difference between traditional descriptions of the lyric and its contemporary outposts can be found in present-day endeavors to unsettle lyric's traditional propensity towards repetition and timelessness. While lyric's ritualistic aspect allows the poem to keep living in time, *Citizen*'s accumulation of micro-aggressive acts testifies to the need to both lay bare and stop ongoing and unconscious racist behavior. In this light, Rankine's poetic project will continue working towards extending existing theories of the lyric by interweaving formal exploration with a pedagogical reading of social standards present both in society and in generic categorizations. Conceiving of the lyric as both a genre where language is organized in a highly conventional fashion and a literary space in which the "intrusion" of extratextual dimensions inevitably alters existing aesthetic frames offers a conceptualization of the lyric genre that ultimately attends to lyrical form as much as to its ethics, while also encouraging aesthetic participation.

In this sense, Culler's articulation of specific formal parameters that may or may not embolden change are formally revisited by Rankine in her own poetic project which is aimed at primarily emphasizing lyric's unique connection to the everyday. Rather than seizing on lyric's claim to indirection and abstraction as topical pre-requisites for the genre, *Citizen* incorporates and negates canonized features in order to *redirect* the tradition of American public poetry, and ultimately transform the type of spectatorship that her readers will themselves perform. By bringing the lyric back into its realities with *Citizen*, not only has Rankine provided critics with new materials whereby to extend already existing theories of the lyric, but she has also reconceptualized lyric's encompassing scope, reframing its outreach towards universality as a promise for the future rather than as a *sine qua non*.

Notes

[1] Rankine is not alone in her critical evaluations of the state of the lyric today. Lyric's recent drive towards new interpretative models responds to writers' and scholars' desire for critical openness towards detailed textual analysis. This is reflected in their constant efforts to equip students and researchers with reading criteria that accept the form's versatility, while also staying mindful of standard visions that have contributed to shaping lyric's enduring reading models. *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2014), *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), *Don't Read Poetry* (2019), and *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), for example, represent a selection of relevant monographic works which have described and inquired into the "lyric turn" the contemporary is bearing witness to (Comparini 403). By emphasizing poetics as a reading approach, these volumes choose to pay close attention to the aspects that make, and keep making, interpretation(s) possible; they work towards finding new criteria for describing form, and for reinvigorating aesthetic response; they engage in tracing textual networks aimed at opening literature to "the richness and complexity of lived experience" (Arata 700); and they maintain a keen eye towards both artistic conventions and methodological questions.

[2] Culler traces back lyric's description as mimesis to Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which rhetoric and poetics are treated as separate domains: rhetoric referring to the art of persuasion, and poetics to mimesis or representation (*Literary Theory* 70). However, differently from Aristotle's demarcation, when speaking of "poetics," Culler is actually referring to the means through which literary effects take place; which features of lyric language are potentially able to construct very effective discourses. While his account of poetics is closely related to rhetoric, the extravagance he relates to lyric discourse is not applicable to lyric's definition as mimesis. This being said, despite all efforts to reunite lyric genre with a very ancient tradition, Culler confidently distances his critical stance from Aristotle's description of poetry. By foregrounding mimesis, Aristotle "focus[ed] on tragedy, comedy, and epic, and [left] lyric aside" (*Theory of the Lyric* 35).

[3] *Nothing in Nature Is Private* was published by The Cleveland Poetry Center as part of an International Poetry Competition organized by the Center and for which the collection won first place in 1993.

[4] In his work, Culler has remarked more than once on lyric's powerful ability to maintain a very close dialogue with the world it both calls forth and derives from. As long

as readers keep ritualistically re-enacting lyric's language, they will continue to voice a reality formally conjured by the lyric itself, while allowing the lyric to constantly rebuild their connection with the world through specific readers/performers across generations.

[5] This definition of imagination was borrowed from *American Poetics of the 21st Century. The New Poetics*. In her critical essay on Juliana Sphar's poetics, Kimberly Lamm espouses Gayatri Spivak's description of imagination as "the great inbuilt instrument of othering" to endorse the creation of a poetry capable of posing ethical challenges to contemporary historical moments by "resisting and retraining the imagination [...] to see and respond to a planet increasingly split and homogenized by globalization, marked and mapped by capitalist and exploitation" (134). What this description invokes is the necessity of poetry's unordinary language to address and make claims about *this* world as readers are asked to voice the poem's claims in their living present.

[6] For further insight into Culler's description of lyric genre and lyrical devices, see "Apostrophe," "The Language of Lyric," "Why Lyric," and "Extending the Theory of the Lyric." To explore Culler's evolving approach to poetics, compare *Structuralist Poetics* with *Theory of the Lyric*.

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